

## Phone Call from Hell: And Other Stories of the Damned

**Jonathan Woods**

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*Woods's concise sensory details create horror and gruesomeness, as well as a solid visual impression.*

A criminal twilight zone reminiscent of the classic television series meets hardcore realism in this jaded twist on human nature. Jonathan Woods delivers his characteristic sardonic view of gritty life in seventeen stories that will make hiding under the bed a comforting thought. *Phone Call from Hell and Other Tales of the Damned* may be a masterpiece of noir fiction—organized insanity at its best.

Subtler than the work of filmmaker Quentin Tarantino yet similar in tone, these literary trips into fits of madness expose the dark side of the psyche. Bizarre protagonists, helpless victims, and frightened participants all make an appearance in this shuddering glimpse of hell. A carefully weighed balance of descriptive words and heart-pounding action propel these devilish plots—excursions that lead to unsettling conclusions, endings that often have the psychological impact of a car crash.

Ominous titles such as “The Handgun’s Tale,” “A Bad Day for a Barbecue,” and “Hearing Voices” hint at what will follow, goading the discovery of just how evil these experiences will get. The pivotal story, and decidedly among the most outstanding, is “Phone Call from Hell.” This spine-tingling, raunchy nightmare follows an unbelievable call from incarcerated killer Charles Manson. Still looking for people to do his bidding, Manson guides the actions of a hapless man from a distance, talking him into seeking the company of a prostitute presumably for vicarious thrills.

Woods establishes a scene using concise sensory details that often create a pungent, gagging reaction, as well as creating a solid visual impression: “When I unlocked the cabin door and pushed it open, a wave of trapped air washed over us, thick with the odors of mildew, sperm and old cigarette smoke. An ancient pig iron floor lamp with a yellowed velum shade cast a fake warmth. While I fumbled with the controls of an electric space heater, the girl paced around the single room, poked her head in the tiny bathroom.”

Jonathan Woods is a lawyer whose work has appeared in numerous literary publications and anthologies. *Phone Call from Hell* is his third collection of short stories.

Wickedly humorous, Woods has managed to set a precarious edge throughout this crazy collection. Like the threat of falling off a cliff into an abyss, he keeps readers clinging to the rock face, unable to let go. Excellent timing and pacing make each “yarn” a sophisticated pulp thriller. The aftereffects will linger long after the story is over.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (Summer 2014)

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